Archival Community Project: Liberation on Two Fronts

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The struggle for liberation is an ongoing struggle that affects each marginalized community differently. Despite these differences, communities are able to borrow and learn certain organizing, resisting, and building tactics from each other, because the fight for liberation ultimately involves each of these communities and is closer in reach when said groups are able to intersect and unite. We see this interweaving of historical and contemporary oppression and resistance tactics between the InnerCity Struggle collective and the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The InnerCity Struggle journals from Luis Sanchez, founder and key community member, showcase how the organization formed out of the need for community support and the ongoing crisis of neighborhood violence, school push-out, and poverty related drug use or gang affiliation (ICS). These materials were particularly interesting since they were the actual hand written journals of Luis Sanchez: detailing notes from meetings, community and group-led activities, budgeting plans, possible solutions to various public school issues, and the main priorities and goals of the InnerCity Struggle.

For example, in the earliest donated notebook (2000-2002), Sanchez lists the concerns of the formed group: “too spread out, general structure, role of staff, role of youth” (Sanchez). More importantly he also lists his concerns with the group being able to infiltrate schools in order to further help youth, and how they would be able to “sustain it, keep them going and involved with youth of color” as well as being able “to develop leadership skills” (Sanchez). From this early stage, ICS is concerned with developmental growth, serving their community, and finding ways to contribute to their communities. From the ICS website, they specifically outline their duty as actively seeking “alternative solutions to reducing crime and violence that wouldn’t involve criminalizing our communities. Instead we invested in developing grassroots leadership that could serve as a progressive and powerful voice for the Eastside” (ICS). It is clear that the goals of the organization haven’t changed drastically at all, and they are still resilient in their community building.

One of the ongoing issues that InnerCity Struggle attempts to combat is the school to prison pipeline that exists in our society. Essentially, this refers to a set track where youths of color are identified as hopeless delinquents in their school systems and are funneled directly into either the juvenile justice or adult justice systems. This stigmatization and criminalization resurgence can be traced back to Bush's administration and the perpetuation of a "superpredator" ideology (Rios 30). The hypercriminalization of brown and black youths is extremely complicated and has multiple factors to consider in its conception and perpetuation. Victor Rios explains it best as a "youth control complex", in *The Hypercriminalization of Black and Latino Male Youth in the Era of Mass Incarceration,* to "manage, control, and incapacitate Black and Latino youth" (17). Rios claims that in our post-prison industrial complex society, the decline of welfare and the expansion of punitive systems—ie. school push out, suspensions, etc.—has led to a "governance through crime" (21). The twisted fact is that Latino and Black youths are often the ones disproportionately targeted and identified as criminals simply for existing. Negative everyday interactions in their schools, communities, and even families illustrate how they are signified as criminals. For example, he highlights the story of Junior, a fifteen-year old Latino, who felt that "school was like jail in the sense that the minute he stepped into it, he was under strict supervision and faced the threat of severe punishment with every move he made" (27). Furthermore, Junior also faced external pressure from cynical adults like family members or teachers who believed he would continue his delinquency streak, as well as his friends who demanded that he had to act tough to survive in the streets (27). Due to this, youth lose faith in their government, and even if they may not want to be seen as "thugs", they may end up embracing this identity (Rios 28).

There are few ways to prevent this stigmatization. In the case of Junior, he saw himself embrace this criminal identity due to a lack of support and belief from friends, family, and school. InnerCity Struggle, like many other youth community centers, plays an important role in the lives of adolescents by providing space to exist and build their own skills. Although, simply

having a community center or organization to help youth is often not enough, because of how ingrained this stigma is embedded in society and public policies. However, any help and support is always appreciated and a step towards the right direction.

In addition, to the hypercriminalization, Black and Latino youth are exposed at much higher rates to law officials and police officers compared to their white counterparts. Identified as “Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC)” in an amendment to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, DMC reflects the racial biases woven into the justice system and the differences in actual offending patterns among different racial and ethnic groups. Essentially, for facilities to receive funding, they must report on the disproportionate representation and contact of youths of color that pass through their systems. DMC is an ongoing issue whose cause can be linked to institutional racism, school related “zero-tolerance” policies, and the use of detention to provide social services that would otherwise not be available to youth (Nellis and Richardson 2-3). The InnerCity Struggle journals from Luis Sanchez reflect awareness of this disproportionate contact when they highlight their very specific desire to “get into schools” of East LA and essentially sustain youth involvement in hopes that community activity will help prevent legal contact (Sanchez). This sentiment shows intense promise, because evidence-based practices and research has shown that more successful initiatives to reduce DMC must all: originate from local community concerns and include stakeholders from the community who have been affected by minority overrepresentation, be transparent, commit to long term investment, and provide unconditional community support (Nellis and Richardson 4-6). InnerCity Struggle hits many of these points, and whether their activities and practices are successful in reducing DMC requires more research. Although, Sanchez’s meeting notes with California Youth Organizing do highlight statewide success in research and organizing against school pushout and zero-tolerance policies. A lot of Sanchez’s notes reflect an evidence-based practice of gathering data from meetings and reflecting on this information to proceed with more effective decisions as well as

identifying other issues. Only time will show the success of InnerCity Struggle in reducing DMC and combatting the hypercriminalization of youth of color, particularly Latinx of East LA.

InnerCity Struggle is not alone in their fight, for a myriad of resistance organizations follow on the heels and efforts of the first Black Civil Rights Movement. The Black Lives Matter Movement is a continued effort for black freedom and rights. When going through founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors' memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist*, there are blatant parallels between the Black Lives Matter Movement and the InnerCity Struggle. These parallels make it clear that various marginalized groups, despite the difference in oppression they may face, are all after the same goal; meaning liberation is unattainable without the liberation for all. Khan-Cullors highlights the theme of community responsibility as well as touches on the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline for her community. She writes, "But having attended schools with both Black and white girls, one thing I learned quickly is that while we can behave in the same or very similar ways, we are almost never punished similarly" (Khan-Cullors 26). She goes on to describe the disproportionate minority contact for Black kids: "In fact, in white schools, I witnessed an extraordinary amount of drug use compared to what my friends in my neighborhood schools experienced. And yet my friends were the ones policed" (Khan-Cullors 26-27). Khan-Cullors' lived experience further proves Rios' points about the over criminalization of brown and black bodies as well as demonstrates an understanding of disproportionate minority contact with the law at a young age. In addition, it is evident how marginalized groups may be oppressed in similar ways which is why their modes of resistance and community building may also echo each other. Both ICS and the Black Lives Matter Movement aim to uplift their respective communities and take responsibility for those who are hurting, who are targeted, and who are criminalized or deemed as terrorists. Differences present themselves when Khan-Cullors' movement grows to be international, and her focus is less on affected youth, but her community at large. She describes this sentiment as "We are firm in our conviction that our lives matter by virtue of our birth, and by virtue of the service we have offered to the people […] And

while we are cultivating this idea in our respective meetings and our respective teams, we, Alicia, Opal, and I, do not want to control it. We want it to spread like wildfire" (Khan-Cullors 204). In fact, the success and growth of the Black Lives Matter Movement serves as a testament to their transparency, strong community support, involvement, and their long-term commitment—all of which are deemed as necessary factors for initiatives attempting to reduce DMC. There are undeniable parallels in the oppression and resistance of BLM and ICS. Both groups can only further benefit from each other as they fight for their own rights and autonomy in the carceral state.

InnerCity Struggle shares many similarities with the Black Lives Matter Movement, but it doesn't make their work lesser. In fact, ICS—just like the Black Civil Rights Movement—is part of an ongoing, overarching fight for liberation that transcends race, sexuality, and gender, because fighting for liberation means the liberation for all peoples. An explosive desire for freedom and the spirit for a better future and stronger community seep out of Luis Sanchez's ICS notebooks that almost exactly mirror Patrisse Khan-Cullors' sentiments within her own memoir. Oppression, resistance, and community building are lived experiences for both Khan-Cullors and Sanchez. Their work doesn't end until they've reached that universal liberation, they and their ancestors have been striving towards.

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